

A HANOI GENERAL MAY BE IN SOUTH

Ranking Official Believed at
Head of Enemy Forces

By R. W. APPLE Jr.
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, Feb. 16—One of North Vietnam's ranking generals may have crossed into South Vietnam to direct Communist fighting forces here, American experts believe.

The general is Nguyen Chi Thanh, a 50-year-old former teacher who once headed the political department of the North Vietnamese Army. He and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the Defense Minister, are North Vietnam's only four-star officers.

General Thanh is also believed to exert considerably political influence through his position as the eighth ranking member of the powerful North Vietnamese Politburo.

Visit to Moscow in 1960

General Thanh, who accompanied President Ho Chi Minh to Moscow in 1960 for a Communist conference, had been considered one of the principal North Vietnamese followers of the Chinese Communists until about a year ago. Then his name disappeared from Hanoi newspapers.

After a long silence, General Thanh wrote in the Dec. 22, 1965, issue of Nhan Dan, the Government newspaper in Hanoi, an article that in the view of many Western analysts confirmed his presence in South Vietnam.

He praised the "South Vietnamese army and people" and said they were capable of defeating the allies. At another point he referred to the Vietcong as "our army."

General Thanh also wrote that "people not involved in the fight could hardly evaluate the full strength of the people's war," suggesting that he himself was so involved.

He May Be at Headquarters

If he is indeed in the South, diplomats in Saigon believe, he is probably working at the joint headquarters of the National Liberation Front, the parent political organization of the Vietcong, and the Central Office for South Vietnam, through which Hanoi exerts its influence in this country.

The possible role of the National Liberation Front in any peace negotiations between the allies and the North Vietnamese has caused friction recently between the United States and South Vietnam and has given new prominence to the front.

Its headquarters, together with those of the Central Office, are believed to be somewhere in the tropical forests of northern Tay Ninh Province, about 75 miles northwest of Saigon. The area has been bombed repeatedly. Today there was a strike by B-52's from Guam, the results of which have not been announced.

The Front was organized at a secret rendezvous in South Vietnam in December, 1960, following an appeal by Hanoi for the creation of "a broad and united front" in the South. By then, the Vietcong insurrection had been under way for years.

Although the Front includes some non-Communist elements, it is dominated by one of the three "political parties" within it, The People's Revolutionary party, which was formed in 1961 by the southern members of the Lao Dong, the Indo-Chinese Communist party based in Hanoi. The name National Liberation Front was apparently taken on to mask its predominantly Communist character.

The Front portrays itself as an amalgam of 35 groups, including the purportedly middle-class Radical Socialist party in the People's Revolutionary party.

Hanoi's control of the Front is not absolute. For example, if resident Ho Chi Minh should decide to undertake peace talks independent of the Front, he could do so. But he would almost certainly risk losing the support of some of its leaders.

The nominal chief of the Liberation Front is Nguyen Huu Tho, a lawyer, who was born in Saigon in 1910 and was educated at Aix-en-Provence, France, in the nineteen-thirties. Mr. Tho was jailed repeatedly in the nineteen-fifties for agitating against French rule.

The principal work of the Liberation Front involves propaganda and recruiting. The front does not control Vietcong military forces.

The Liberation Army is the Vietcong's conventional military force. The People's Armed Forces are the Vietcong's guerrillas. No military man was even represented in the Front leadership until January, 1964, when Tran Nam Trung was elected vice chairman of the Front.

Little Known of Leadership

Little is known about the military leadership, with the possible exception of General Thanh. Most of the prisoners who have been taken by the allies have not given any detailed information about their senior officers. Some have not even given the name of the commander of their own company.

The Front, the regular army and the guerrillas are controlled by the Central Office, known to

American intelligence men as COSVING.

It, in turn, reports to the reunification department of the Hanoi Government. The department is headed by Nguyen Van Vinh, a Communist who was active against the French in the South during the Indochinese war. He served as Hanoi's liaison officer to the International Control Commission in Saigon until he was expelled in 1956.

Mr. Vinh does not, however, hold a major position in the party leadership. For this reason he is not considered to be the real driving force behind the Vietcong.

Role for LeDuan

American experts believe that role is held by Le Duan, a militant Marxist who serves as first secretary of the Lao Dong. Born in Quangtri Province in 1908, he is one of three southerners in North Vietnam's Politburo.

Through the years of struggle against the French, Le Duan played a leading role in the South. By the time of the decisive battle against the French at Dienbienphu, he was acting as commissar at Southern military headquarters. In 1956 he was chosen as first secretary for the

Lao Dong Central Committee in South Vietnam.

He is known as a bitter man, more determined than many of his colleagues to fight the Saigon Government to the finish. He opposed the Geneva accords of 1954 on the ground that they wrongly permitted the partition of Vietnam and the creation of the Government of President Ngo Dinh Diem in his homeland.

There is fragmentary evidence that Le Duan's intransigence is largely responsible for Hanoi's refusal to consider peace negotiations. One report even suggests that he is becoming a more powerful man than President Ho Chi Minh.